METHODIST ORIGINS

The term 'Methodist' requires explanation and precise definition. The word originated in Oxford, when certain students, including John and Charles Wesley, formed themselves into what was also called 'The Holy Club', and because they lived by 'method', the name was given to them. In origin therefore it was a nickname, but it eventually became the name by which John Wesley's societies were known and from there developed into the Methodist Church we now know.

In its widest sense it covers not only the work of John Wesley and his followers, but also of George Whitefield and Howell Harris, represented today by the Presbyterian Church of Wales, known at one time as Calvinistic Methodism and includes the societies formed by the Countess of Huntingdon.

These apart, Methodism as derived from Wesley, was one and undivided during his lifetime, but following his death in 1791 there were several secessions, all of which maintained the name Methodist, but which are distinguished by other titles and of course other features and emphasis, the details of which need not be stated here.

The first secession was in 1797 when under the leadership of Alexander Kilham, a Wesicyan Minister, the **Methodist New Connexion** was formed. In the first half of the nineteenth century further breakaways led to the formation of other bodies; such were the **Primitive Methodists** in 1807 led by Hugh Bourne and William Clowes. In 1815 a group known as **The Bible Christians** (the only group not to include the word Methodist in their title) was formed in the west country, but they were an off-shoot of the parent body. A small group to be known as **Protestant Methodists** was formed in Leeds in 1827 and a further group known as the **Wesleyan Methodist Association** was formed in 1836.

The final disruption came in 1849 when certain men determined to reform Wesleyan Methodism and these became known as Wesleyan Reformers. Unsuccessful in their reforming zeal, they eventually joined forces with the Protestant Methodists and the Wesleyan Methodist Association to constitute what became known as the **United Methodist Free Churches** (1857). Not all the reformers joined this united church, but formed their own under the title **Wesleyan Reform Union,** which church continues to this day.

The year 1857 might well be described as the first attempt at union, and fifty years on, three of the divided groups came together - the United Methodist Free Churches, the Methodist New Connexion, and the Bible Christians to form the **United Methodist Church** (1907). In 1932 the final union was consumated by the coming together of the United Methodist Church, the Primitive Methodist Church, and the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Thus today we think of the Methodist Church, as one and for practical purposes and for future action it is one, but the purpose of the historian and the genealogist the earlier divisions need to be understood.

One further aspect of the divided Methodism ought to be noted. In 1806 there were secessions from the main body which became known as **Independent Methodist Churches** many of which continue to this day. And then there is the Salvation Army, not an off-shoot of Methodism in the way other bodies seceded, but the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, was in his early years a Methodist Minister first in the Wesleyan Reform movement and later in the Methodist New Connexion.

Divided as Methodism was through one hundred and thirty five years, there were many likenesses to each other, as well as some marked differences, which need not be discussed here, except to say that they all produced much written material and many printed books, and it is this material which is of interest and value to those who work in genealogy and family history.

METHODIST ADMINISTRATION

Methodist administration is on a four tier system.

John Wesley held his first Conference in 1744 and this has been held in all the various branches ever since to the present day. The word Assembly was given to these annual events in some of the branches. Hence the Conference Journal and the subsequent printed Minutes (or Year Book) provide information on top level administration and the stationing of the Ministers.

Secondly, the twice yearly Synods of the Districts became part of the administration and published reports of the district activities, much of it in statistical form and providing names of district officers and their several committee members.

Thirdly, the Circuits held their quarterly meetings, two in particular: one for Local Preachers, the other for general administration of the circuit. Minutes of these meetings have been taken and many are still preserved.

Fourthly, the local church or chapel was and is administered by a selected group of officers, responsible for both the fabric of the building and the spiritual welfare of the members.